

Statement of Chris Hahn
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Introduction of The Ban Asbestos In America Act Of 2003
By Senator Patty Murray (D-Wa)
May 22, 2003

Beginning early in the last century, American industry began to exploit the uses of asbestos, called by some the “miracle mineral.” By the time usage peaked in the 70’s, asbestos was used virtually everywhere in our modern environment -- in a wide variety of occupational settings; many materials used in constructing our homes, schools and other buildings; and all kinds of commercial and consumer products, right down to toasters and blow dryers.

As a result, millions of Americans were exposed to asbestos. Asbestos was known to be dangerous by the 30’s and 40’s; and by the 60’s the fact that it caused mesothelioma, an aggressive cancer of the linings of the lungs, heart or stomach, was well-established medically. Yet for the most part there were no warnings, and certainly not adequate safety precautions.

Contrary to what many people think, the problem did not go away in the 70’s. Instead, the incidence of mesothelioma has been increasing. The incidence increased all through the 90’s, and currently about 3,000 Americans per year die from the disease. Experts believe the incidence may continue to increase for another 20 years. This is certainly due to the long latency of the disease; it may also result from the fact that with so much asbestos now in our modern environment, exposures are continuing to occur.

These victims of mesothelioma are America’s heroes. One third of current mesothelioma victims served the country in the U.S. Navy or in U.S. shipyards. These are people like Col. Zumwalt’s father, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt Jr., who served our country for his entire career in the U.S. Navy. They are people like Congressman and public servant Bruce Vento. While earning his teaching credential, he had worked for a few summers in a factory near some asbestos-insulated equipment. Thirty years later, he died of mesothelioma. They are people who fulfilled the American ideal of working hard to make a life for themselves and their families. The reward for their lifetime of hard work and service to country is a mesothelioma diagnosis.

As the Executive Director of the Mesothelioma Applied Research Foundation, I speak every week with many of these victims, or their spouses or adult children, who come to MARF desperate for help. Let me tell you what these people are concerned about.

Primarily, they are not concerned about finances. Treatment for mesothelioma patients most often is highly experimental, may not be covered by insurance, and involves long-distance travel to one of the few centers in the nation attempting to aggressively treat mesothelioma, and then lodging during the recovery from radical surgery and during months and months of chemotherapy and radiation.

This is exceedingly expensive, so finances are a concern, but not the main one. When you are facing the loss of your lung, or your life, or your loved one's life to mesothelioma, concepts of "compensation" just don't apply.

What these Americans are concerned about first of all is treatment. Typically their doctor has told them that this is in effect a death sentence; that they have about a year to live and that nothing can be done. Can you imagine how emotionally crushing it is to be told, despite all our society's progress in the war on cancer, that for your disease no effective treatments have been developed and there is no hope? So the first concern of mesothelioma patients and their loved ones is the development of effective treatments to extend their lives and reduce the horrible pain and suffering they otherwise face.

Second, mesothelioma patients and their families are concerned about the future. They first suffer shock at how their own innocent, unknowing actions have led to such a horrible disease. They then become aware of how widespread asbestos is, and how many others are being unknowingly exposed.

They are concerned about the rescue workers and citizens of New York who breathed large quantities of pulverized asbestos following 9/11. Thirty years from now, when some of these heroes are stricken with mesothelioma, will there be as little offered to them in terms of effective treatment as is offered to mesothelioma patients today? Patients are concerned about the people of Libby Montana, and the millions of people living in homes with asbestos-containing insulation. They are concerned about children being exposed to asbestos in their homes and schools. They want to know, what is being done to help and protect these people in the future?

So on behalf of MARF I commend Senator Murray and her cosponsors for addressing these concerns. Through the Ban Asbestos in America Act they are meeting their constitutional responsibility to "provide for the general welfare." By finally banning asbestos completely, the Act will save lives which we know, to a medical certainty, would otherwise be lost. And by providing funding for much-needed research, the Act will stimulate improved treatments to extend the lives and reduce the suffering of mesothelioma patients. Thus, the Act will stop the national tragedy of asbestos from afflicting us for another century.